DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 467 EA 027 649

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TITLE The Limits of Shared Decision-Making. ERIC Digest, Number 108.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, Oreg.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-EA-96-8
PUB DATE Jul 96
CONTRACT RR93002006
NOTE 3p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Department 5207 University of Oregon, 1787 Agate Street, Eugene, OR 97403-5207 (free; $2.50 postage and handling.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Leadership Styles; *Organizational Climate; *Organizational Communication; *Participative Decision Making; Teacher Administrator Relationship; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Influence; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, shared decision making (SDM) has become a significant part of school-reform efforts. Advocates say that SDM will improve student learning, create teacher satisfaction, and develop new forms of leadership. This digest presents an overview of research that investigated whether SDM delivers on these promises. Studies indicate that so far there is little consistent evidence that SDM increases student achievement. Teachers generally report feelings of empowerment and are more likely to support collaborative decisions; however, SDM often creates conflict and difficult negotiations among participants. Principals often experience difficulties in changing their leadership roles and finding a balance between showing support and letting go. These early studies suggest that enthusiasm about SDM should be tempered with realism. (Contains 10 references.) (LMI)

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ED 397 467

ERIC DIGEST

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The Limits of Shared Decision-Making

By Larry Lashway

In the 1980s, a startling vision of education's future began appearing in reform proposals: schools run by committees of teachers, without an administrator in sight. While few practitioners (including teachers) considered that a serious goal, most agreed that teachers deserved to play a greater role in school governance. Since then, shared decision-making (SDM) has become a significant part of school-reform efforts.

In SDM, teachers are key players in determining school policies and practices. The rationale is simple: those who are closest to student learning are best equipped to make educational decisions.

Advocates say SDM will improve student learning, create teacher satisfaction, and develop new forms of leadership. Does it deliver on these promises? While it is premature to make definitive judgments, early studies suggest that enthusiasm should be tempered by realism.

What Are the Predicted Effects of SDM?

Lynn Liontos (1994) emphasizes that the primary purpose of SDM is to improve teaching and learning. Since students learn in classrooms, not board rooms, teachers should be deeply involved in the decision-making process. Having a practical understanding of classroom complexities, teachers will presumably focus on programs that improve achievement.

A second predicted outcome is increased job satisfaction. Involvement in decision-making will create ownership, commitment, and a sense of empowerment, as collaboration leads to new roles and relationships. At its best, SDM should promote equality and make the school a more democratic workplace (Joseph Blase and colleagues 1995).

A third prediction is that SDM will create new forms of leadership. Not only will teachers be brought into the process, but principals will devise new strategies based on facilitation and trust rather than hierarchical authority. "Letting go" will be a major administrative priority (Liontos).

How Does SDM Affect Teaching and Learning?

So far there is little consistent evidence that SDM increases student achievement (Edward Miller 1995). While it may be too early to expect dramatic results, some researchers contend that SDM efforts seldom address the "core issues" of teaching and learning.

Studies of SDM frequently mention a tendency to focus on "trivial" issues such as parking, bus supervision, and smoking in faculty lounges (Liontos). Gary Griffin (1995) found that while teachers willingly tackled schoolwide issues such as curriculum frameworks, they seldom examined daily classroom practices.

Carol Weiss (1995) discovered that SDM schools sometimes launched significant reforms but that the push for innovation usually came from the principal—against the opposition of many teachers. Teacher participation "acted as a brake on the pace of school reform."

Faced with these negative findings, researchers speculate that traditional school culture may simply overpower SDM. New roles and relationships are ambiguous, time-consuming, and often uncomfortable. SDM may be regarded skeptically as just another passing fad, giving teachers little reason to transfer their allegiance to the new way of doing things (Weiss 1995).

Griffin notes that teaching is a "culture of isolation," in which practitioners use their own professional judgment to make key instructional decisions in the privacy of their classrooms. The teachers he interviewed believed their own methods were effective and took a "live and let live" attitude toward the practices of colleagues.

Weiss (1993) suggests that teachers' caution may be justified. Experience has taught them to be wary of high-sounding "Ed School ideas" that they will be expected to translate into practice, often without help from the system.

How Does SDM Affect Teacher Satisfaction?

As expected, teachers are pleased when their views influence school decisions, leading them to feel both respected and empowered. Collaborative efforts are often taken seriously, and decisions are more likely to be supported (Griffin; Weiss 1993).

However, Weiss and colleagues (1992) found that SDM often created conflict among teachers. Disagreements that could formerly be politely ignored now had to be

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resolved; the balance of power sometimes shifted, with enthusiastic rookies having as much influence as veteran teachers; and time and energy were drained by the need to learn a new way of doing things.

It may take several difficult years before participants learn to work with the new approach, and the learning curve is not smooth. Weiss (1993) says her team did not see "linear progression" in the SDM schools they studied. "Everywhere there were ups and downs, movement and relapse, optimism and disenchantment.... SDM is not a process that, once introduced, necessarily matures and flowers."

How Do Principals Lead SDM Efforts?

In theory, SDM calls for new modes of leadership: teachers lend their expertise, and principals become facilitators rather than directors. In practice, the new behaviors can be elusive.

Participants often tend to shape their new roles with old assumptions. For example, Angela Spaulding (1994) studied one principal who was consciously manipulating the process to move it in the direction he wanted by planting ideas, pressuring opponents, and showing favoritism to supporters. This principal characterized his approach as "going through the motions" of SDM, but he still saw himself as the source of decisions.

Even when principals are committed to SDM, they still have a special accountability that makes it difficult to be consistently facilitative. Blase and colleagues found that some enthusiastic supporters of SDM took a more directive approach at key moments, exercising vetoes when decisions by teachers threatened to harm students.

Nona Prestine (1993) uncovered another leadership dilemma. If principals don't play an active, visible role in SDM, teachers may fail to take it seriously; yet participation that is too vigorous may convince teachers that the principal is still in charge.

In short, SDM seems to be a complex process that does not lead to simple leadership strategies.

What Lessons Have We Learned About SDM?

Research and practical wisdom make it clear that SDM is not easy for anyone; teachers and principals do not painlessly reinvent themselves overnight. Schools using SDM should be prepared for a long-term process requiring considerable training. Principals who have had success with SDM consciously strive to develop effective decision-making skills and structures (Kent Peterson and colleagues 1995).

It is also evident that while teachers may be closest to the classroom, they do not automatically zero in on substantive instructional issues. Because the reasons appear to be rooted in the overall culture of schools, steering the discussion to productive agendas is not a simple task. However, some schools have achieved good results by beginning with an explicit discussion of the school's mission and vision for the future (Weiss and colleagues; Peterson and colleagues).

Finally, principals may need to exercise both facilitative and directive skills. "Letting go" is important, but there are also times when principals must act more assertively to keep the effort on track. Knowing when to "switch hats" from one leadership mode to the other is a key skill.

These difficulties do not mean that SDM has failed, just that major cultural changes don't happen overnight. Weiss and colleagues note, "In the schools we studied, people complained a good deal about the aches and strains of shared decision-making, but only one or two people said that they wanted to go back to the way things were in the past and even they hedged."

Resources

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